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Chitjian family, circa 1918.
Hampartzoum on the left

THE CHITJIAN FAMILY COLLECTION AT CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE A PRIMARY SOURCE FOR ARMENIAN CULTURAL HISTORY HASMIG KELLIGIAN BARAN

hasmig.baran@csun.edu

Established in 1956, the California State University at Northridge (CSUN) has been an integral part of the San Fernando Valley in greater Los Angeles. Its commitment to student success, excellence, and service to the community has made it a national model for institutions of higher learning with more than 35,000 students annually.

The students of Armenian descent consistently constitute between 8 and 10 percent of the overall student body.

The Armenian Studies Program (ASP) at CSUN, established in 1982, is a part of the Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures (MCLL) department within the College of Humanities. One of its missions is to promote Armenian Language, Culture, and related fields and to prepare new generations of scholars and teachers of Armenian subjects.

Within this larger context, the ASP in recent years received a very generous donation from the Chitjian Foundation in terms of both funds and material culture. The archival component is reposed at CSUN in two locations, at the Chitjian Room in Sierra Tower 404 and at the Special Collections section at the main CSUN library. The following essay pertains to the history and contents of this gift for the knowledge of and utilization by scholars and others.

WHO WAS ZARUHY CHITJIAN?

Zaruhy “Sara” Chitjian was born in 1933 in Mexico City, Mexico, as the second child of Hampartzoum “Harry” Chitjian from Kharpert and Ovsanna Piloyan from Malatya, both survivors of the Armenian Genocide. Hampartzoum endured six unspeakable years escaping from various villages and finally reaching Mexico City in 1923. There he met his future wife, Ovsanna Piloyan, another immigrant. In 1935,

Hampartzoum, his wife, and two children immigrated to Los Angeles, California, seeking new opportunities and to join their relatives.¹

During her formative years, Zaruhý attended Garfield High School in East Los Angeles, where she began cultivating her commitment to education and community service. She later pursued higher education at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), earning a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology in 1959. Sara dedicated her professional life to education, serving the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) for 34 years. Notably, she was among the district's pioneering teachers in ethnic and Armenian studies, helping to introduce and develop curricula that celebrated cultural diversity and Armenian heritage.²

Beyond her career in education, Zaruhý was a passionate philanthropist who made lasting contributions to various educational and cultural initiatives. She provided scholarships for the Genocide and Human Rights University Program at the Zorian Institute in Toronto, Canada, and was a benefactor of the Armenian Studies Program at UCLA. She also founded the Research Program in Armenian Archaeology at the UCLA Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, established endowments to support an entrepreneurship program at the American University of Armenia and the study of the Armenian Genocide at the University of Southern California (USC). She also established an endowed scholarship for students enrolled in the Armenian Teacher Training Program and the Chitjian Family Archive at California State University, Northridge.³

In 2014, Zaruhý furthered her philanthropic legacy by establishing the Zaruhý “Sara” Chitjian Charitable Foundation. Her life’s work was characterized by a steadfast commitment to education, Armenian cultural preservation, and humanitarian causes. She passed away in Los Angeles in 2021, leaving behind a remarkable legacy of service, generosity, and advocacy for the Armenian community.⁴

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CHITJIAN COLLECTION AT CSUN

The foundation of the Chitjian Family Collection at CSUN began with Zaruhý’s dedication to preserving her family’s legacy and Armenian cultural heritage. In 2016, the Hampartzoum, Ovsanna, and Zaruhý “Sara” Chitjian Foundation established an endowed scholarship at CSUN for students enrolled in the Armenian Teacher Training Program, strengthening Zaruhý’s ties to the university and laying the groundwork for future collaboration. Seeking a fitting home for her father’s extensive archival materials, she worked alongside Lorraine Alexander, a seasoned fundraiser and close friend, to identify an institution that would honor and safeguard the collection for scholarly research.⁵

Recognizing the CSUN’s large Armenian student population and Zaruhý’s longstanding support, Lorraine recommended CSUN as the ideal location. Souren Seropian, the Director of Development in the College of Humanities, coordinated a

¹ Chitjian Finding Aid https://oac.cdlib.org/finding_aid/ark:/13030/c82z1d78/entire_text/.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Interview with Suren Seropian, Senior Director of Development, Andrew J. Anagnos College of Engineering and Computer Science, California State University, Northridge, Granada Hills, CA, September 1, 2025.

series of discussions with university leaders including Elizabeth Say, Dean of Humanities; Brian Castronovo, Chair of MCLL; and Vahram Shemmassian, Director of the Armenian Studies Program. Together, they explored the potential for dedicating a special room at CSUN to house the Chitjian Collection. The university then presented a formal proposal to Zaruhý, stating that with a major philanthropic contribution of \$1,000,000, CSUN would establish a dedicated space for the archives to properly preserve and display the collection. Zaruhý embraced the proposal and generously donated the amount to create the Chitjian Room in Sierra Tower 404, ensuring the family's archives would have a permanent, accessible home.⁶

Following this agreement, designer Nora Nalbandian was commissioned to bring the Chitjian Room to life, with Zaruhý remaining closely involved in the process. The resulting space, housed in the MCLL Library, now serves as a vital resource for students and scholars, capturing the Chitjian family's immigrant journey and contributions to Armenian culture for generations to come.⁷

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COLLECTION

The creation of the collection was driven by Zaruhý's dedication and vision, which revealed her values about her identity in the form of cultural expression. Over a span of fifteen years, from 1998 to 2013, she painstakingly assembled and organized the various materials. There was no initial plan regarding the organization or components of the collection, which led to some gaps in the documentation, particularly concerning Ovsanna Piloyan's life and experiences. Despite these challenges, Zaruhý's commitment ensured that a significant portion of the family's history was preserved.⁸

Inspired by Zaruhý's professional activities within the Los Angeles Unified School



The Chitjian room at CSUN and some of its exhibits

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Hampartzoum Mardiros Chitjian, *A Hair's Breadth from Death; The Memoirs of Hampartzoum Mardiros Chitjian*, Taderon Press, London and Reading, 2003, pp. xii-xv, 349-56.

District, her father, Hampartzoum, devoted time to recording his life story. These early documents express his memories and emotions in the forms of direct descriptions, poems, sketches, personal reflections, while his correspondence with his brothers details his escape from Turkey through Iraq, Aleppo, Iran, France, and Mexico. Hampartzoum's effort resulted in his memoir, *A Hair's Breadth from Death*, published in 2003. In part one of the book, he describes his life before the Genocide; in part two, the Genocide years; and in part three, the rest of his life in Mexico and the United States of America. The original memoir was written in Armenian and was later translated into multiple languages including English, Turkish, Spanish, French, German, and Chinese.⁹

Later in life, at age 82, Hampartzoum began creating collages to cope with personal losses, including the deaths of his son and his twin brother within a short period. These creative works are also included in the collection, offering another dimension to the family's legacy.¹⁰

After Hampartzoum's passing, Zaruhý gathered his written works and stored them together, although unfortunately, some of the original documents were lost. Nevertheless, what remains are photocopies and carefully preserved items that continue to tell the family's story.¹¹

Although Hampartzoum and Ovsanna shared their experiences with family and friends, the growing interest in Armenian Genocide survivor memoirs during the 1970s prompted Armenian institutions in the United States to record these stories on tape. Both Hampartzoum and Ovsanna participated in interviews in 1977, 1988, and 1996, and they appeared as eyewitnesses in several documentaries about the Genocide produced during and after the 1970s.¹²

CONTENTS AND COMPONENTS OF THE COLLECTION

The Chitjian Collection consists of 171 boxes of materials preserved by the Chitjian Family Foundation. It includes a diverse array of items: photographs, oral histories, correspondence, collages, artifacts, clothing, shoes, jewelry, newspaper clippings, periodicals, books, curriculum materials, memorabilia, ephemera, and writings produced by members of the Chitjian and Piloyan families. Many of the artifacts are items brought by Ovsanna's family from Turkey and Aleppo, further enriching the narrative of the family's journey. These materials reflect Hampartzoum Chitjian's and Ovsanna Piloyan's experiences of the Armenian Genocide in Kharpert and Malatya, from 1915 until the 1920s. It also includes their individual paths of immigration from Armenia to Mexico in the 1920s, and their relocation to Los Angeles from 1935 through the 2000s.¹³

The collection also includes correspondence between members of the Chitjian and Piloyan families, including Zaruhý, her brother, Mardig (Marty), Ovsanna's family, and Hampartzoum's brothers. Additionally, it includes Zaruhý's personal educational

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c82z1d78/entire_text/.

journey as a teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District and her efforts at promoting ethnic and Armenian studies programs districtwide.¹⁴

Zaruhy created an extremely detailed binder system to organize the Chitjian Family Foundation materials. The naming and organizational structure of the binders have been preserved. Searchable digital copies of her binder outlines are available to researchers.¹⁵

The collection is organized into three principal series, Chitjian and Piloyan Family Materials (1914-2016), Hampartzoun's Legacy and Writings (1914-2016), and Zaruhy "Sara" Chitjian Research Materials (1914-2020). Copies, edits, and translations of some original items from series I are kept in series III. Some of the translations have multiple versions as several experts were consulted.¹⁶

Series I: Chitjian and Piloyan Family Materials (1914–2016)

This series brings together materials that illuminate the personal lives of the Chitjian and Piloyan families, focusing on their experiences of the Genocide, immigration, diaspora, and community formation. The items in this section include documents, photographs, and artifacts directly created or owned by Hampartzoun, Ovsanna, Mardig, and Zaruhy. A primary component is a set of about 300 original letters written by the Chitjian family between 1914 and 1997, mostly authored by Hampartzoun, with others from his twin brother Kaspar and a few dictated by his father in 1914 and 1915. These letters are presented in their original Armenian and Ottoman scripts, along with English translations and multiple edited versions, with copies kept in Series III. Series I also includes family biographies, books, clothing, correspondence, ephemera, memorabilia, photographs, scrapbooks, writings, immigration documentation, and select issues of Armenian periodicals such as *Nor Gyank* (New Life), *Asbarez* (Arena), and *Nor Serunt* (New Generation) newspapers, as well as *Bab-Oukhdi* and *Nor Malatia* (New Malatia) magazines. Together, these materials offer a comprehensive view of the family's history and identity across generations, arranged alphabetically and following Zaruhy's binder structure.¹⁷

Series II: Hampartzoun's Legacy and Writings (1914–2016)

Series II contains mostly paper materials created by Hampartzoun Chitjian recounting his experiences, as well as others documenting his legacy and personal accounts as a survivor of the Armenian Genocide. It includes correspondence written by Hampartzoun promoting the recognition of the Armenian Genocide, maps of his village and the Kharpert region, accounts and collages of his memories of the Genocide (the pre-cursor to his memoir), his personal views about traditional Armenian family life and values, culture, language, politics, religion, and community leaders (including people he later mentions in his memoir), notes on books and articles, as well as his recounting of his teaching experiences with Zaruhy. It also includes press coverages about his memoir, and his legacy as a survivor of the Armenian Genocide. Accounts include his early life in Kharpert as well as life in Los Angeles during his advocacy for recognition of the Armenian Genocide and its

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

survivors. Materials are arranged alphabetically and follow Zaruhý's binder structure.¹⁸

Series III, Zaruhý "Sara" Chitjian Research Materials (1914–2020)

Series III contains two subseries of materials collected, organized, and contextualized by Zaruhý for the purposes of facilitating the completion of her father's memoir and continuing the work of teaching about Armenian culture and the Genocide. Materials are arranged alphabetically and follow Zaruhý's binder structure.

Subseries A: Chitjian Family Foundation Materials (1914–2018)

Subseries A focuses on the Hampartzoum and Ovsanna Chitjian Family Foundation's mission and includes translations and copies of correspondence (the Chitjian letters), oral history transcripts and edits, maps, edits and copies of Hampartzoum's memoir drafts, and the Chitjian Family Foundation papers and indexes. The Chitjian letters written by and to the Chitjians, reaching nearly 300, were brought together in 1990. Most of them were letters Hampartzoum had written, but some were from his twin brother Kaspar, and a few letters were written by his father in 1914 and 1915. The original letters are kept in Series I as a part of the Chitjian Family materials, and all translations and edits are kept in Series III. Materials are arranged alphabetically and follow Zaruhý's binder structure.¹⁹

Subseries B: Zaruhý "Sara" Chitjian Personal and Professional Materials (1947–2020)

Subseries B encompasses both personal and professional materials collected by Zaruhý. It includes her writings, memorabilia, and ephemera, as well as resources and educational materials assembled for teaching about Armenian history, culture, the Genocide, and the diaspora. This subseries features documentation, correspondence, curriculum materials, photographs, and examples of student work from her Armenian Studies classes for the LAUSD. There are also travel-related items and memorabilia from visits to the Middle East, class notes from her academic career, including primary, undergraduate, and sabbatical studies, and a comprehensive collection of newspaper clippings, organized according to her personal classification system. Additionally, Zaruhý compiled a searchable list of article titles within digitized binder outlines. The subseries concludes with materials related to the scholarly study of archaeology, Armenian history, and the Genocide, as well as philanthropic endeavors, and Zaruhý's reflections on her parents' experiences as Genocide survivors and her identity as an Armenian American.²⁰

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE COLLECTION

While the Chitjian family preserved this collection for sentimental reasons, its significance extends far beyond the private sphere. Researchers will find the collection a valuable resource for exploring the unique stories preserved within each category, such as history, sociology, art history, identity, immigration, survivors' stories, and Armenian communities in Mexico and the United States.

Family archives function as micro-historical records that complement or challenge official histories. While national archives may record wars, economic crises, immigration, etc., family documents reveal how these events were experienced in

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

daily life as exemplified in Hampartzoum's memoirs. Personal letters written among family members also reflect cultural values and social norms. They shed light on family roles and sentimental life. They are more than private exchanges; they are records that also serve as a valuable qualitative sociological source. Hampartzoum's nearly 300-letter collection with English translations is available to researchers, historians and anyone interested in the genuine account of Hampartzoum's survival during the Armenian Genocide. Family letters show how large-scale social forces such as war and migration affect relationships, unlike formal documents or institutional records. The letters exchanged between Hampartzoum and his family members reflect the intersections of his life and the social structure that existed in his time. They also reveal the literacy level of people and the language used then. At one point during his six-year stay in Turkey from the onset of the Genocide, he wrote and read letters for other Armenians for two khouroushes (piasters) each.²¹

The collection also offers an important lens into immigration history. These documents provide researchers with a window into the lived experiences of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide and the family dynamics post-calamity survival as immigrants. For example, Hampartzoum's letters reveal his inner pain and suffering because of his separation from his family during the Genocide years. His correspondence with family and friends during his years in Mexico illustrates how he built his new life. Similarly, the 213 pages of the Piloyan letters, mainly of Ovsanna Piloyan's correspondence with her sisters Margarette in New Jersey and Nevart in New York, reflect their experiences restarting their lives in a new country as immigrant survivors. These letters have not been translated from Western Armenian to English.

Materials also offer insight into family identity and continuity. They preserve narratives of origin, migration, and adaptation that form the foundation of collective memory within a family. The stories embedded in such collections are often passed down as cultural capital, shaping how descendants understand their place within broader social structures as was the case with Zaruhý as she initiated the creation of the collection. Her attachment to the material culture of her roots and her major philanthropic contribution to house the collection are a testament to collective identity preservation and continuity.

Similarly, the Chitjian Collection, including the photographs, heirlooms, decorative objects, personal garments and artworks of Ovsanna Piloyan, all hold a distinct importance in art history because they bridge the intimate world of private everyday life with the broader narratives of cultural production and preservation. Museums and institutional archives traditionally safeguard authoritative or foundational works; family collections often preserve materials that reveal alternative histories. They document visual culture in the domestic sphere such as Ovsanna's collection of embroidery, garments, and her artwork. Through these private collections art historians can trace styles, movements, and techniques, and can build more inclusive accounts of cultural production.

PRESERVATION OF LEGACY AT CSUN

Housing the Chitjian Family Collection at CSUN safeguards the memory of genocide survivor Hampartzoum Chitjian. Through careful documentation it

²¹ Chitjian, p. 212.

guarantees that these precious materials remain accessible to future generations. The collection serves as a vital resource for understanding how families remember, interpret, and contribute to the broader social fabric. The Chitjian archive enriches our understanding of the Armenian experience and provides scholars, students, and community members with invaluable resources for research and reflection. Ultimately, collections such as this honor the resilience of past generations and ensure that their stories continue to inform future generations.

Zaruhy Chitjian's philanthropic efforts have profoundly enriched the Armenian Studies Program at CSUN. Her generous contributions have established a legacy that supports academic research and the preservation of Armenian culture. By fostering an environment of learning and remembrance, Zaruhy's work inspires others to participate in safeguarding Armenian history.

THE INAUGURATION OF THE CHITJIAN ROOM AND SPECIAL COLLECTION

On Tuesday, October 14, 2025, the Armenian Studies Program at CSUN held a special room dedication in honor of Zaruhy Chitjian and her parents. Over sixty guests attended the event including the Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures (MCLL) Department Chair, professors, students, and Armenian community leaders.

The ceremony began with a brief dedication and ribbon-cutting in Sierra Tower 404, giving attendees an opportunity to tour the room and view the partial collection on display. Following the dedication, guests walked from Sierra Tower to the Whitsett Room on the fourth floor of Sierra Hall for a full program of speakers and a dinner. Suren Seropian, Senior Director of Development for the College of Engineering and Computer Science made the opening remarks. He said, "This dedication furthers the story of the American experience here on campus. It adds to the contributions that Armenians have made and continue to make." He then invited Dr. Adrian Perez Boluda, MCLL Department Chair, to speak. He expressed gratitude to the Chitjian family for entrusting the university with this extraordinary gift, adding, "Today, the collection is part of CSUN's Special Collections and Archives, open to anyone who wishes to study, teach, or simply understand a remarkable story of resilience and education."

Next, Prof. Hasmig Baran introduced the Chitjian family, remarking, "Every name carries a story, but what lies beyond the name is a unique journey, a collection of experiences, values, and dreams that define a person far more deeply than words alone ever could. Every person's life is far more nuanced and meaningful than just a name written on a plaque."

In turn, Ellen Jarosz, head of CSUN's Special Collections and Archives, took the podium and noted in her speech, "Archives, including the Chitjian family's records, offer unique and personal evidence of how individuals experience historical events and eras we often learn about only through large-scale narratives."

Lastly, Prof. Shemmassian in his speech stated, "The Chitjian family collection first and foremost contributes to the study of Armenian history at the micro level. It also opens up new venues for the understanding of the Armenian Genocide, thereby humanizing the calamity rather than just rendering it a narration of numbers and chain events. Given the Chitjian family stayed several years in Mexico before entering their final destination of the United States, the various items in their holding shed new light on the little studied Armenian community in that country as well as Armenian -

Mexican relations. Last but not least, the sizeable amount of documents and material culture contributes to the understanding of the Armenian immigrant experience in California.” Following the speeches, the attendees gathered for dinner and had the opportunity to explore the items displayed from the special collection.

This auspicious event marked a significant milestone in preserving the Chitjian family’s legacy for posterity. It not only underscored the importance of their contributions, but also brought together university leaders, faculty, students, and community members for a shared appreciation of Armenian heritage and the personal histories behind the collection.

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hasmig.baran@csun.edu

Յօդուածը պատում է ՔՆՀՆի մեջ Չիթճեան ընտանիքի հաւաքածոյին ստեղծման, որոն բացումը կատարուած է Հոկտեմբեր 2025ին: Զայն նախաձեռնողը Զարուիին է՝ Եղեռնէն վերապրած Համբարձում Չիթճեան եւ Ովսաննա Փիլոյեան ընտանիքի դուստրը, 1 միլիոն տուլարի նուիրասուութեամբ:

Հաւաքածոն կ'ընդգրկէ Չիթճեան եւ Փիլոյեան ընտանիքներու 1914-2016ի պատմութեան եւ Համբարձումի ու Ովսաննայի անձնական նիգերը, 1914-97ին գրուած շուրջ 300 ընտանեկան նամակները, Համբարձումի եղեռնեան յուշագրութեան հայերէն ձեռագիրը, որ թարգնուած է անգերէնի ու տպուած՝ *A Hair's Breadth from Death* վերնագրով, Զարուիիին՝ իբրեւ ուսուցչուիիի, անդույ ճիգերը՝ Հայոց Յեղապանութինը դպրոցական ծրագիր ընդգրկելու, անձնական ձեռագրերը, գրութիւններ, արուեստի անձնական ստեղծագործութիւններ:

Հաւապէս մշակուած այս արխիվ հարուստ աղբիր է Եղեռնէն մազապուրծ անձերու ընտանետրման եւ յետեղեռնեան հայ ընտանիքի յառաջացման պատմութեան համար:

